

Church of the Immaculate Conception
12th and Jefferson Streets
Brownsville, Texas

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Western Office, Division of Design and Construction
San Francisco, California

PHOTO-DATA BOOK REPORT
HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

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CHURCH OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

Brownsville, Cameron County, Texas

ADDRESS: 12th and Jefferson Streets, Brownsville, Texas
OWNER: Catholic Church
OCCUPANT: Catholic congregation of Brownsville, Texas
USE: Church

PART I: HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Though Franciscan missionaries had been an important stabilizing device in the Rio Grande area of Texas and northern Mexico since 1690, the parishes were secularized in 1821---and less and less religious activity began to occur as a result. Revolutions terminating in 1836 resulted in a dearth of priests, and spiritual neglect was evident in all quarters of the physically fatiguing Rio Grande Country.

This neglect, however, soon became a challenge to Father John Timon; and he attempted, with twelve brother Vicentians, to revive the spiritually starved area along the Gulf of Mexico in Texas between 1838 and 1848. This revival led to the founding of the Diocese of Galveston in 1847. It was but a bare beginning, as the twelve priests were expected to serve a scattered population of approximately 200,000 persons.

The Texas challenge continued to be extended, and the Oblates of Mary Immaculate answered it. The treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 confirmed the north bank of the Rio Grande to the United States. This area included some thirty parishes along the river, and the Oblates were attracted to the potential implied therein.

The first Oblates were Fathers Pierre Telmon and Alexander Soulerin. They eventually found themselves in Brownsville; and, after a very brief reception, Father Telmon was "scouring the the town, looking for a place to say Mass. A rich merchant named Gary loaned...a store. The counter was fixed up into an elegant little altar, and the shelves formed a well-

decorated background. Thus the two Oblate priests were able to celebrate Holy Mass on the feast of the Immaculate Conception, their Patroness and Mother. We must therefore consider December 8, 1849, as the official date of the.....first permanent Oblate establishment in the United States."¹

"On June 29, 1850, the feast of St. Peter, the first Mass was celebrated in a more permanent chapel residence. This small frame building cost seventeen hundred dollars and was situated on a lot which, in the subsequent plotting of the city, became a block bounded by Adams, Jefferson, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Streets."²

However, apparent lack of success caused the withdrawal of the mission at Brownsville early in 1851. A second attempt would occur. Land was ceded for the purposes of a seminary college for young men in Galveston as well as a parish site plus a school site in Brownsville (this decision was made on November 14, 1851). This encouraged new missionaries to leave Le Havre on the Belle Assise in March, 1852. On May 11, the ship docked at New Orleans, then continued with a select group to Galveston. Among this select group was a man by the name of Peter Keralum. Keralum would eventually be the architect for the permanent structure of the Church of the Immaculate Conception.

In view of the fact that the small settlement of Roma lay half way between the more populated areas of Brownsville and Laredo, the first permanent structure was built at Roma, but by 1856, the cornerstone had been laid for the Brownsville structure on July 6. Father Keralum prepared the construction plans, and Brother Pierre Roudet took it upon himself to inspire the making of two hundred and fifty thousand bricks of local clay by hand. "To collect the funds sent to New Orleans by the Proagation of the Faith and to purchase the lumber needed for the new church, Father Verdet...set sail in August, 1856. The weather was rough at Brazos Santiago...when he embarked on the ill-fated Nautilus, carrying a cargo of two hundred head of cattle. On August 9, the ship entered Galveston harbor with great difficulty. Father Verdet had been ill from the start and was in a miserable condition. A terrific storm struck the ship near La Derniere Ile. All were lost but one negro who seized a door on which he floated for nine days."³ The church was completed in June, 1859.

¹ Doyon. P 22.

² op. cit. 25

³ op. cit. 73

The first bell for the church had originally adorned a steamboat. On the completion of the new church, it was moved to the new belfry. "In 1866, Father Parisot's hope of getting new bells for the church was realized quite unexpectedly. He prepared a big concert to raise the money, and then called at the office of Captain (Mifflin) Kenedy to request that his daughter be allowed to appear on the program. When the Captain expressed his belief that the child was too young to sing in public, Father Parisot replied that she was already very proficient in her part. The Captain, who had been writing at his desk during the conversation, then handed Father Parisot a check for two thousand dollars, saying, 'I know you want bells. This will help you get them.'"⁴

"There was the question of purchasing a pipe organ at the price of \$1,450. The ladies of the parish raised \$600 of this amount and were confident of their ability to obtain the whole sum; but Father Parisot, foreseeing some delay in the matter, took it up with his customary zeal and during a tour through the country increased the fund to \$1,315 in a novel manner. The people had little ready money, but most of them possessed cattle; hence Parisot took tithes of livestock and returned to town with a herd of sixty-five cows in front of him. He disposed of the cows at a raffle, realizing eleven dollars a head. This left a very small balance due on the organ, and it was summarily settled."⁵

The nine crystal and bronze chandeliers were purchased in Paris from the factory of Pousiellgues, and these were paid for by a cash gift of \$1400 from Jeremiah Galvan. The cost of the entire structure was \$31,000 while the cost of the furnishings within reached \$8,000.

In 1874, the church was designated as a cathedral. In regard to out-buildings, a community house (residence) was finished by 1861. It is brick, two stories in height, and 80 by 34 feet in dimension. There is a gallery from which one can view the river. Bricks were made for a future boys school (each stamped O. M. I.), but these were requisitioned in 1861 for additions to Fort Brown. The vestry, 55 by 26 feet in dimension, was added in 1890.

It seems reasonable to include a short biography of the architect. Pierre Yves Keralum (often abbreviated to Peter Kalum, known as 'El Santo

⁴ Doyon. 72

⁵ Chatfield, op. cit., p. 8, c.2.

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Padre Pedrito, ' or the 'Lost Missionary') was born in Quimper, Brittany, on the 2nd of March, 1817. After completing his secondary education, he became a cabinetmaker---later studying architecture in Paris. Following some success as an architectural practitioner in Paris, he made his profession as an Oblate of Mary Immaculate and was ordained the following year (in 1852 at age 35). In addition to designing the church at Roma in 1854, he assisted the secular priests at Laredo in the construction of the St. Augustine church in 1872.

Father Keralum's strenuous activity for twenty years along the Rio Grande---including many personal restraints which were injurious to health ---caused him to age prematurely. Being a horseback priest, he necessarily went from ranch to ranch on extended journeys. Leaving Brownsville on the 9th of November, 1872, Father Keralum, almost blind, began a circuit which would not permit his return until after the New Year. On November 12 and on schedule, he arrived at the ranch called Tampacuas (four miles north of Mercedes). From there, he departed for the ranch of Las Piedras some eighteen miles northward. He never arrived at this station. On the 15th of November, his horse was found unfettered, but dragging a lariat. Immediately, search parties were assembled; but no trace could be found of the luckless priest. Three months later, on the 18th of February, Requiem High Mass was celebrated in his honor at Brownsville. Much speculation and rumor resulted from this disappearance.

In 1882, a ranchero from Las Pitatas by the name of Manuel Aleman went into thick chapparral to disentangle two cows. While engaged in this activity, he found the skeletal remains of Father Keralum---identified by his Oblate cross, the chalice and paten, a holy oil stock, altar-bread box, a holy water bottle, a piece of a rosary, an altar bell, a watch, and eighteen dollars in silver. "His saddle was hung carefully on the tree and none of his belongings were missing so that it is thought that he died of illness or was attacked by wild animals."⁶

6 The Mission Times

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REFERENCES AND SOURCES

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| Doyon, Bernard, O. M. I. | <u>The Cavalry of Christ on the Rio Grande</u> , 1849-1883. Bruce Press. Milwaukee. 1956. |
| Hafernick, Jean. | "The Lady Chapel Adds Brownsville Beauty." <u>Corpus Christi Caller</u> . May 7, 1961. |
| Horgan, Paul | "Devil in the Desert." <u>Saturday Evening Post</u> . May 6, 1950. |
| | <u>Mission Times</u> . Volume XXVIII. Number 10. Friday, December 4, 1936. Section III, Page 5. |
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PART II: ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. Architectural Interest and Merit: The Gothic Revival structure is a latin cross in plan with the roof of the nave resting on eight fluted interior columns in addition to the buttresses which take the thrust on the side walls. The exterior brickwork is extremely well detailed. The proportions of the structure are well handled. This structure is significant as an outstanding example of mid-nineteenth century architecture in Texas. The condition of the fabric is excellent, the church being actively in use.

B. Technical description of the exterior.

1. Overall dimensions. The dimensions of the nave are 50 by 150 feet. The crossing at the apse is 23 by 85 feet. The central tower is 88 feet high.
2. Foundations. Brick, continuous bearing with footings under piers.
3. Wall construction. Brick buttressed. There are notes to the effect that the brick was stuccoed on the exterior. Examination of the building seems to indicate otherwise.
4. Porches, stoops, bulkheads, etc. Recessed entry heavily moulded on north facade.
5. Chimneys. None extant. Makeshift metal chimney not original.
6. Openings-doorways and doors. Pair of nine paneled wood doors in gothic arched, brick and wood heavily moulded reveals. Decorated wood tympanum above entry (north) doors. Windows. Gothic arch stained glass windows surrounded with brick and wood mouldings. (Principal stained glass window given by Captain Mifflin Kenedy in honor of his wife Patra).
7. Roof. Pitched about twelve in twelve. Covered with asbestos shingles. Original tiles mentioned in references not extant. Parapets brick, laid in continuous wheel pattern with open work.

C. Technical description of the interior.

1. Floor plans. Latin cross. See 'architectural interest and merit' above.

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2. Stairways. Wood.
3. Flooring. Wood, varies.
4. Wall and ceiling finish. Walls plastered on interior. Ceiling canvas, painted blue, paneled with three hundred gold stars.
5. Doorways and doors. Wood.
6. Trim. Wood. Tiles of black and white marble used in portions. Pulpit carved from mesquite wood. Two confessionals.
7. Hardware. Not significant.
8. Lighting. Nine crystal and bronze chandeliers purchased in Paris (France) from the factory of Pousiellgues.
9. Heating. Not significant architecturally.

D. Site.

1. Orientation. Main door faces north.
2. Enclosures. Iron fence with stucco covered pilasters covers cathedral grounds.
3. Walks. Brick and concrete. References state that original walks were brick.
4. Landscaping, gardens, etc. A memorial to the Oblates rests in the northeast corner of the church yard, and, in addition, the family vault of Simon Celaya on the northwest.

PREPARED BY W. Eugene George, Jr. 14 January 1962
W. Eugene George, Jr., A. I. A.

APPROVED Charles S. Pope DATE 2 April 1962
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